Internet Resources for Literature Teachers

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Almost daily the *Straits Times* or the *New Paper* feature stories on new uses of the internet, ranging from monitoring stocks to selling durians. Few of these applications, however, touch upon literature and drama, or the humanities in general. Educators and other workers in the arts fields are notoriously—perhaps stereotypically—technophobic. Additionally, many of us may feel that the use of computers to study literature seems to violate our basic principles: literature is, after all, about the relation of human beings to society, and most forms of literature require the direct response of a human reader. A computer can solve complex mathematical problems, but can it comprehend, let alone teach Shakespeare, or Catherine Lim?

A simple answer to the above question is that computers cannot replace teachers, but that they are a valuable tool which can, if used successfully, aid teachers in lesson planning and teaching. The internet, at its best, might be thought of as a huge library and storeroom of teaching aids which is increasing in size at an exponential rate. Resources for literature teachers are still limited, but time invested now in becoming familiar with the internet will enable teachers to use these resources as they become available.

Presently, all secondary schools and junior colleges have Internet access through accounts provided by the Ministry of Education (MOE). These generic accounts for the schools are limited and accessible only by the teachers and administrators of the school, though not all teachers are given the user identification numbers. Students in the schools are not given Internet access, except for students of the schools under the pilot project Student's and Teacher's Workbench (STW), and schools which have Internet accounts through other providers such as Singnet, Pacific Internet or Cyberway. Students' use of the Internet in most schools at present is therefore very limited and closely supervised by teachers.

The MOE is looking at the possibility of linking all schools to its local area network in the near future. For the moment however, due to the limited accessibility, the use of the Internet in the school by teachers is mainly for research and resource materials. Teachers in schools which have more accessibility to Internet can use it as a teaching tool for students and teachers as the vast volumes of information available and unlimited wealth of resources make teaching and learning borderless. Students if guided in the use of Internet, will be exposed to a rich resource for learning, for research topics to support learning, and for completing assignments. As it is, students in schools in the STW pilot project are learning science from interactive material presented by the computers, reviewing the day's lessons any number of times at their own pace, and searching for additional information to compile and present project reports. It is certainly potentially possible for students and teachers in Literature to do the same. However, due to limited accessibility of the Internet to students in most schools, this article concentrates upon the internet as a resource base for teachers.

To access the sea of information in Internet through the accounts provided by MOE, the easiest way is through the use of the browsing software Netscape which has been configured into most of the systems in the school. Browser software allows users to search the vast amount of data on the Internet and the World Wide Web(WWW) more easily. Teachers in the schools wishing to use Netscape to navigate the Internet need only to activate the dial-up to Netscape by clicking on their dial-up icon (usually Ewan or Trumpet Winsock) before clicking on Netscape. A useful hint to remember here is to remember to wait for the hourglass to disappear first before activating the Netscape icon. Once the hourglass vanishes, you are immediately linked to the *Singapore Ministry Of Education* home page. This indicates that you are now hooked up to the Internet.

In the *Singapore Ministry of Education* home page, you will see different titles and options. Click on whatever titles or information you wish to access. The button *Educational Resources by Subject* will allow you access to the different subjects available, one of which is Literature. Another way to use the Internet through Netscape, is to type in the address of a particular location or home page (referred to as a Universal Resource Locator - URL) in the 'Location' box which is

found above the *Singapore Ministry of Education* home page, sandwiched in between two toolbars offering you various point-and-click commands.

For the new surfer to the Internet using "Netscape, the following are some of the commonly used Toolbar Buttons:

Back	–	views the previous page
Forward	–	displays the next Web page
Home	–	returns to your home page
Reload	–	fixes a scrambled Web page
Open	–	manually retrieves a new web page and displays it (you just type the address)
Print	–	prints the existing page
Stop	–	stops the transfer of Web pages.

Placing the cursor on each button and clicking will activate the functions. A useful button which is invaluable is *Bookmark*, found at the top of the toolbar. If you like a particular location or want to return to it later, simply click on *Bookmark*. This action means that you have marked the location with a bookmark. To access it at another time, click on *Bookmark* which will then display the address(es) of the location(s) you have marked. Placing the cursor on the address and clicking it will take you to wherever it is pointed.

As the number of people hooked on the Internet is increasing by the thousands every day, information may take a while to arrive on the computer screen. The best time to access Internet is between eight to ten in the morning or in the small hours of the night. Do not be alarmed if the retrieval stops midway; simply exit and start again. One way to utilize time while waiting for the information to be downloaded/retrieved, is to simultaneously work on another document, for instance a word processing document or a spreadsheet. This can be done by pressing the keys *Alternate (Alt)/Tab* which will allow you to switch rapidly to another document in a different program within the Windows operating system.

Information on specific literature resources on the World Wide Web may be found in two ways: firstly, though the use of search engines, and secondly through a number of Literature home pages. Search engines are devices which search the whole web and find documents which answer a given description; using them is a little like using a computerised library catalogue. A teacher searching for information on Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *The River Between*, an "O" level set text, could type in the search term "Ngugi" when prompted. The search engine would then list a series of web documents which deal with Ngugi, and provide links to them. Netscape incorporates its own search engine, which can be used by clicking on the "Net Search" button, or by choosing the menu item "Internet Search" in the pull-down "Directory" menu. Two more comprehensive search engines which produce better results are *Alta Vista* and *Excite*.

Search engines tend to be rather blunt instruments, and may produce many false leads for every useful page. More precise tools to find out information are the various Literature home pages. These pages provide a listing of literature-related sites on the net, often arranged into several categories and subcategories. A visit to the *English Server at CMU*, for instance, will produce a series of buttons on screen, each representing a particular literary genre, period, or critical approach. Clicking on the button for drama leads to a menu of resources such as a complete play texts, biographical information on playwrights, and newsgroups devoted to drama. If using a search engine is like using a library catalogue, using home pages is closer to browsing library shelves. Netscape users may find that it takes a little time to search through home pages for specific resources: then again, there is always the delight of running into something unexpected while looking for something else.

The *NIE Literature and Drama Resources on the Internet* home page provides a series of connections to other Home Pages: it is short, and thus is very speedily displayed through the Netscape browser. From the NIE page, a Netscape user has a choice of four Literature home pages. The most comprehensive at present seems to be *On-Line Literary Resources*, which is maintained by a heroic graduate student in English at the University of Pennsylvania. This page has recently acquired a search form which makes it much easier to use. A more attractively designed alternative is the *English Server at CMU*,

which lists a huge amount of resources, including newsgroups. Since it is maintained by a group of graduate students and academic staff, this home page's long term prospects are probably better than those of the University of Pennsylvania home page. Two other alternatives are *Voice of the Shuttle: English Literature Page* and the *WorldWideWeb Virtual Library: Literature*. These pages are shorter, and less comprehensive, but are worthwhile alternatives if you cannot connect to the other pages.

Other useful home pages include NIE's listing of *Educational Resources on the Internet*, which can be supplemented with the previously-mentioned resources listed on the MOE Home Page. As teachers become used to using Netscape, they may also be interested in more specialist home pages. The *African Studies Center Home Page*, for instance, provides links which will help a teacher who wants to find out the cultural backgrounds of the writers Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) and Ngugi wa Thiongo (Kenya).

Teachers who have their own e-mail account and an ongoing interest in literature can also subscribe to newsgroups and join mailing lists. Newsgroups are a forum to which any member can contribute a "posting," a written opinion, message or question which is distributed to all subscribers. Each newsgroup is dedicated to a special topic, which can range from very broad to very narrow. One newsgroup, for example, is dedicated to the humanities in general, while another specializes only in Shakespeare. Mailing lists are similar but, as the name implies, all postings are delivered directly to you by e-mail: unless you are very selective in subscriptions, you will find your electronic mailbox crammed with messages each morning. Both services are ideal forums in which to ask questions or share teaching experiences.

As a concrete example of a World Wide Web search, let us suppose a teacher teaching "O" Level wants to find out background information to R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days*. Entering the term "R.K. Narayan" into *Alta Vista* gives 140 documents. Scrolling through the list, and picking only the ones which seemed most relevant, we discovered a brief article on Malgudi itself, which would make a nice student handout, one on Narayan's short story collection *Swami and Friends,* and another placing Narayan's writing within a larger context of Indian writing in English. The latter article also had a further list of

websites with information on India and Narayan's cultural background. *Excite* was less productive, giving only a list of Narayan's works and the full text of his essay "My America". The Literature home pages a present show a strong bias towards American, and to a lesser extent, British Literature, and so a brief scan produced no results.

The results of the search above show the benefits of using the World Wide Web to Literature teachers, but also the drawbacks: information may still be sparse on many authors, and sorting out potentially useful leads from a mass of apparently irrelevant information can be frustrating and time-consuming. Following internet leads requires something like the interpretative skill needed in close-reading fiction or poetry, and trying to find pertinent information fifteen minutes before class will inevitably result in failure. It is certainly possible to envisage a time, however, when a teacher could not only download information on Shakespeare's life, and suggestions for teaching strategies, but also music from Shakespeare's England, a complete video of the play, and interactive software which would allow students to act out the roles of different characters. Rather than replacing teaching, such information has the potential to make better teachers out of all of us.

NOTES

Gan Boon San and Kuda Vidanage Deepthi S. Using computers to enhance teaching, *Straits Times*, Feb 7, 1996, Computer Times section.

APPENDIX: USEFUL WEBSITES AND NEWSGROUP ADDRESSES

USEFUL WORLD WIDE WEB SITES

SITE	URL
African Studies Center	http://www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/AS.html.
Alta Vista	http://altavista.digital.com/
Educational Resources on the Internet	http://www.ntu.ac.sg/~amanda/nie/nie.shtml
English Server at CMU	http://english-server.hss.cmu.edu/
Excite	http://www.web-search.com/excite.html
On-Line Literary Resources	http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jlynch/Lit/
Literature and Drama Resources on the Net (NIE)	http://www.ntu.ac.sg:80/nie/arts/litdra/litguide.html
Voice of the Shuttle: English Literature Page	http://humanitas.ucsb.edu/shuttle/english.html
WorldWideWeb Virtual Library: Literature	http://sunsite.unc.edu/ibic/IBIC-homepage.html

NEWSGROUPS

Some news groups can be accessed through the "Newsgroups" button on the Netscape toolbar. It is probably best to pick one or two newsgroups that seem useful, and to spend some time following the discussions before joining in with questions or suggestions. Note that newsgroups are often unmoderated, and that the material can vary from the informative to the offensive.

NEWSGROUP	DESCRIPTION
humanities.lit.authors.shakespeare	Shakespeare questions
rec.arts.books rec.arts.theatre rec.arts.prose	Three general interest groups which are good for getting started. The names of more specialized groups are posted periodically.
soc.culture.africa	Good for African writing and cultural information. Leads to more specialized groups, e.g soc.culture.nigeria
soc.culture.indian	Useful for writers such as R.K. Narayan